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ABSTRACT

A study analyzed the ideological messages about welfare recipients promoted in two welfare-to-work educational programs. Data were collected through interviews with students, teachers, and administrators at an adult literacy classroom serving unemployed women on welfare and an employment preparation program designed to increase job skills of women on welfare; classroom observations; and curriculum materials and official program documents. Data were analyzed for themes addressing ideological assumptions about participants as learners and welfare recipients. Findings indicated descriptions of students in the programs revealed deficit perspectives that reinforced the demonization of welfare recipients occurring in public and policy rhetoric; the formal curriculum and teachers in both programs focused on their students as welfare recipients and repeatedly stressed their dependency on "the system;" and the formal curriculum and teachers described students in terms of the many deficits it was perceived they possessed. That perspective included that students lacked proper morals or ethics; they had problems with personal hygiene and appropriate appearance; they had many life problems stemming from lack of family support, education, knowledge of good nutrition, good parenting skills, money management skills, and life management skills; and many lacked a work ethic and motivation, failed to put forth effort, and were lazy. (11 references) (YLB)

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Text, Lies, and the Welfare State: The Portrayal of Welfare Recipients in Welfare-to-Work Educational Programs

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Abstract: This study explored the ideological messages about welfare recipients promoted in two welfare-to-work programs. It was found that programs are greatly influenced by the unjust stereotypes about welfare recipients upheld in popular rhetoric. It is concluded that critical educators should question these dominant discourses and find ways to promote this questioning in programs.

Background and Purpose of the Study

The welfare system is once again at the center of debate in the United States, with the recent passage of the Welfare Reform Act. Critical educators and researchers interested in welfare reform have discussed how political and popular discourses about welfare make unwarranted and stereotypical assumptions about welfare recipients' moral behavior, "family values," and work ethic, despite evidence to the contrary that disproves and problematizes these myths (Abramovitz, 1996; Sidel, 1998).

Educational programs designed to help welfare recipients become "self-sufficient" and enter the job market exist in a social and political environment in which welfare recipients are stigmatized, demonized, and constructed as "the enemy within" (Sidel, 1998). While critical educators have exposed racist, sexist, and classist stereotypes of welfare recipients prevalent in both popular and political discourses about welfare (Fraser, 1989; Sheared, McCabe, & Umeki, 2000; Sparks, 1999), more research is needed that examines the role educational programs for welfare recipients play with regard to these myths. It is crucial for critical educators involved in these programs to examine the myths promoted in popular discourse as they provide context for the programs, help to shape the beliefs held by teachers, and also inform the practices that occur within programs. The purpose of this study, then, was to analyze the ideological messages about welfare recipients promoted in two welfare-to-work educational programs.

Research Design

Employing an ethnographic case study design, I spent four months in an adult literacy classroom in the Southeast United States that served unemployed women on welfare, and two months in an employment preparation program designed to increase the job skills of women on welfare. At these programs I conducted interviews with students, teachers, and administrators, conducted classroom observations, and gathered curriculum materials and other official program documents. I analyzed data using qualitative content analysis, searching for themes in the data that addressed ideological assumptions about participants, both as learners and as welfare recipients. Questions guiding data collection and analysis included: How do teachers and official program discourses describe students? What assumptions do instructors and the programs make about the welfare system and their students' places in it?

Findings

Descriptions of students in these programs revealed deficit perspectives that reinforce the demonization of welfare recipients occurring in public and policy rhetoric. Embedded in this

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discourse are myths and unjust stereotypes about welfare recipients, African Americans, and undereducated people, such as that they do not value education, they lack values and morals, and they do not want to work. This ideology regarding welfare recipients, so pervasive in our society, is a contributing factor to the ways in which these programs depict students.

In both programs, both the formal curriculum and teachers spent a great deal of time highlighting negative aspects of students, explaining what was wrong or different about students, and discussing what they lacked. This deficit view of participants highlighted faults and needs rather then strengths and abilities. Stressing the point that students "need fixing," Julia, a job training teacher, stated, "We just want to fix everything for them, so that they'll stay on the job, and see that it's not a bad thing. It's like with children, it's hard to watch them fail. Even though sometimes that's how all of us as humans learn our best lessons. We don't want them to do that." According to both the formal program discourses and teachers, what needed fixing in students was their dependency and also a variety of deficits.

Dependence

First, the formal curriculum and teachers in both programs focused on their students as welfare recipients, and repeatedly stressed their dependency on "the system." Barbara, a literacy teacher, for instance, stated, "They've never had to take a job, or never had to really earn their own money and save their own money. Many of them have been dependent on someone else paying their bills, buying their groceries, giving them a place to live." Sandra, a job training teacher, also stated, "They've always had everybody do everything for them!" Julia, another job training teacher agreed: "Somebody's always looked after them. Somebody's always come in and rescued them."

Often teachers went further than stating their students were dependent on the system and accused them of abusing it. This made teachers angry and evoked statements about how they felt resentful of system abusers. When teachers discussed this issue, they often constructed themselves as "hardworking taxpayers" who were paying for this system abuse. Kim, a literacy teacher, for instance, stated, "I don't want to take care of anybody else that's able enough to work. I hate to come when I don't feel good. And here these girls are, younger than me, sitting around." Barbara, another literacy teacher, discussed how many of her students had several "out-of-wedlock" children and was upset that, as a taxpayer, she had to support these children. She stated, "We're paying for all those babies, through the welfare system." Teachers were also quick to jump to the conclusion that students were acting in fraudulent ways and shared stories about clients who learned the rules of the DFACS system in order to stretch them to their limits.

Deficits

In addition to being labeled dependent, students were also described by the formal curriculum and teachers in terms of what they lacked or what they needed to learn from the programs. That is, they were described in terms of the many deficits they possessed. For instance, the job training program described its participants as "clients of DFCS and other agencies, striving for self-sufficiency, and in need of education, training, and/or employment." The range of deficits presented in the formal curriculum was wide: students were presented as lacking knowledge about good hygiene, morals and ethics, basic skills, and life management skills such as knowledge of money management, food and nutrition, and parenting skills. Teachers also stressed that students lacked proper morals and ethics, motivation and work ethic, maturity, academic skills, and proper behavioral skills.

Morals and ethics. One deficit stressed often was that students lacked proper morals or ethics. This was seen in the personnel guidelines for both programs, in the formal curriculum

materials, and in the formal mission statement of the state TANF program. In both programs the personnel guidelines focused on making sure students behaved in moral and ethical ways. One telling statement in the job training personnel guidelines is the following, which was printed in bold faced type and in all capital letters, and was the third point presented in the guidelines: "USE OF ALCOHOL OR NON-PRESCRIPTION DRUGS WILL LEAD TO IMMEDIATE TERMINATION." This statement assumes that participants need to be admonished about using drugs and drinking. Curriculum materials in the job training class also revealed assumptions about the moral and ethical character of participants. One of the more popular curriculum books used in this class was written expressly for men who had just been released from prison, and focused on how they could succeed in a new job. There were sections focusing on morals and ethics, including one on "honesty and respect," and one that stressed how to avoid behaviors that would result in a relapse into prison. The teachers expressed to me how they really liked this book and did not have a problem using it even though it was designed for ex-prisoners and its use sent strong messages to participants regarding their moral worth.

Another example of the focus on students' morals comes from the formal mission statement of the statewide TANF program, which provided funds to both programs I observed. This statement contains references to "questionable" moral and ethical behavior of TANF recipients. For instance, one goal of the program is that "incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies is prevented and reduced and annual numerical goals to prevent and reduce the incidence of these pregnancies is established." Another goal is "the formation and maintenance of two-parent families." All adult recipients who have a child over the age of one are required to participate in a work activity, and there is a "family cap" which denies any TANF recipient who has another child after ten months on assistance any increase in cash assistance due to the birth of an additional child. These statements in the state plan support the stereotype that women on welfare are promiscuous, judge women on welfare as not living up to the standard of "normal" two-parent families, imply that staying at home and taking care of children is not considered a worthy use of one's time, and punish women for having more children. Women on welfare are thus degraded and treated as undeserving of aid.

Teachers, too, often questioned students' morality. They shared stories of students who were abusing drugs and alcohol, and who liked to "party" too much. Julia, a job training teacher, for instance, described her frustration with some of her students who she feels waste time partying when they could be studying for the GED. She said, "They have time and they get sitters and they have transportation to go hang out with their man, or hang out in a bar. Why can't they do it for the GED classes?" Teachers often judged women on welfare to decide whether they were good mothers working to get off the system, or it they were using the system and having babies out of wedlock to get more money. Barbara, an adult literacy teacher, for instance, discussed her students in terms of their status as unwed mothers, and stated that she just could not understand why "they keep on having these babies." The job training teachers also described students as promiscuous. Several teachers used the phrase "lollypopping" to describe their students' perceived tendencies to hang out in clubs and "party." I asked another teacher why she thought her students ended up on welfare and she said, "Some of the girls were hot tails." She further explained that "A lot of 'em dropped out of school when they got pregnant, and just didn't go back and finish."

Personal hygiene. The programs also assumed that participants had problems with personal hygiene and appropriate appearance, and highlighted this perceived deficit in personnel guidelines, evaluation criteria, and classroom curriculum. In fact, a great deal of time in the job

training program classes was devoted to addressing this perceived problem. The personnel guidelines in the job training class, for instance, focused on dressing "appropriately," and having "a neat, clean appearance, including personal hygiene." These guidelines even went so far as to state that "appropriate under attire will be required at all times." The criteria on which students were officially judged in both programs also contained references to personal grooming, hygiene, and appearance. Students in the literacy program, for instance, were judged on whether or not they were "clean and neat." Students in the job training program, too, were evaluated on how "appropriately" they dressed, whether they presented a "neat, clean appearance," and whether they practiced "personal hygiene." Personal hygiene was also stressed in the curriculum materials in the job training program. Taking showers, using deodorant, and brushing teeth were all stressed as important practices to ensure good personal hygiene. The focus on hygiene reveals an assumption that participants either lacked knowledge of these issues or failed to practice good hygiene, and thus needed to be taught this information to make up for this deficit.

Life problems. The third deficit was that participants have many life problems stemming from lack of family support, education, knowledge of good nutrition, good parenting skills, money management skills, and life management skills. This deficit was highlighted in the many GED materials found in the adult literacy program, in the brochures describing the life skills segment of the job training program, and in the curriculum used in the job training program. For instance, one life skills brochure focused on the "chaos" that participants experience in their lives making it hard for them to achieve their goals of self-sufficiency. To remedy this situation, the life skills curriculum addressed different aspects of this "chaos," which comprised the different lessons presented in the program, including personal health and hygiene, nutrition, money management, parenting skills, and employment. Presenting participants as lacking these skills reveals the programs' deficit perspective in which participants' "skills, world view, and attitudes . . . have been dismissed or downgraded" (Fingeret, 1990, p. 40).

Teachers also described students in terms of the personal problems they face in their lives. Often when teachers discussed students' problems, they were linked to students' lack of knowledge about different life skills, or a perceived inability to manage their lives. Julia, for example, described students in terms of their problems. She stated, "Well, here's all these folks that have never worked. Never been in any kind of structured activity. So this class is designed to get rid of barriers. Like childcare and transportation. Domestic violence. Illiteracy." Sandra, a job training teacher, focused on one particular problem she sees in students: their lack of knowledge about health and nutrition. She said, "One day I sat in on the nutrition class. No one in that class knew the 5 basic food groups! I was floored! I couldn't believe they didn't know!"

Lack of motivation. A final deficit discussed by teachers is that many of their students lack a work ethic, lack motivation, fail to put forth effort, and are often just lazy. In the same vein, teachers talked about students as having bad attitudes. An excerpt from my fieldnotes shows how Sandra held this attitude about her students: "Sandra said that students are not really doing much in the classes but they're getting paid for it. She said people want to come to this program because "it's easy" and they don't want to have to go out and get a real job." Another example comes from Denise, a job training teacher, who characterized her students as sitting around at home watching television. She said, "Sittin' at home everyday, watching soap operas, you don't ever think about why nutrition is important, why being assertive will help get the message across, things about personal health, money management. You don't think about stuff when you're just sitting at home doing nothing." In addition, teachers in the literacy program very frequently described students as not working or trying hard. Barbara,

for instance, stated, "Many of our young ones on TANF just haven't learned how to really get to work and stick to something. And sometimes if they have a question, they'll just sit there."

Discussion

The programs in this study supported mainstream stereotypes regarding welfare recipients. They stressed the ideas that the women in the programs were dependent on the system, were unwilling to work, were abusing the system, had a multitude of ethical and moral problems, including that they had too many out-of-wedlock babies, and that they had alcohol and drug problems. These and other negative myths about welfare recipients are documented and disputed by many critical sociologists and educational researchers, including Sidel (1998), Abramovitz (1996), Dujon and Withorn (1996), and Piven and Cloward (1993). Sidel (1998), for instance, sums up many of the myths—so pervasive in our society—that serve to stereotype, stigmatize, and demonize the poor, particularly poor women. She states that women on welfare have been portrayed as:

> The embodiment of the characteristics Americans revile—laziness, willful dependence on government, wanton sexuality, and imprudent, excessive reproduction. They are frequently described as transmitters of negative values or, even worse, of no values at all; their family structure and child rearing have been blamed for fostering violence, crime, school failure, out-of-wedlock births, and above all, for passing their poverty on to the next generation. (Sidel, 1998, p. 167)

She goes on to describe how women on welfare have become the scapegoats for America's economic and social problems, positing that

> In the eagerness of many in positions of power to deny the structural causes of poverty and the other ills that beset American society, politicians and policy makers have revived the "culture of poverty" analysis and laid the responsibility for poor people's problems and many of the problems of the wider society at the feet of the most impoverished and powerless among us. "They" don't want to work, it is said. "They" want something for nothing. "They" are like animals who have been given too much, conditioned to be dependent, and consequently can no longer make it on their own. "They" have too much sex, have too many babies, and all too often care for them miserably. (p. 167)

These myths lead to a deficit-driven and judgmental view of welfare recipients highly infused with racism and sexism. Poor women are held to be the cause of a variety of social and economic ills having their roots in an oppressive patriarchal society and a profit-driven capitalist economy. Abramovitz (1996) explains that

> The discussion about welfare reform is not—and has never been—about welfare alone. Rather, . . . politicians and policymakers regularly rediscover welfare when they cannot explain or reverse troublesome social, economic, and political trends. Poor women and welfare come under attack either because the provision of cash assistance interferes with the dynamics of the free enterprise system or because it undermines the traditional family structure. During such periods of "panic," welfare and the women receiving it are bashed in order to divert attention from the true causes of the nation's ills (p. 15).

Sidel (1998) concludes that these myths persist despite repeated refutation by scholars and experts in the field of social welfare because "the United States *needs* to have someone to blame, people to hate, a group to rally against" (p. 12). The unfortunate victims of this scapegoating are

primarily poor, African American women who are caught in the welfare system and thus subject to a self-reinforcing stigma—"the low status of its recipients stigmatizes the program, and low status of the program stigmatizes its recipients" (Gordon, 1996, p. 109).

That the programs in this study also uphold these racist and sexist myths is not terribly surprising, since these programs exist in a society where these myths are pervasive and powerful. Although not surprising, it is still a disturbing situation, especially for critical educators who believe in the power of education to help engender social change. It is troubling to find teachers who ideally should be advocates for welfare recipients but who instead are operating within these dominant myths. The findings of this study raise questions about the purpose of educational programs for welfare recipients, and lead me to ask whose interests these programs ultimately serve (Cervero & Wilson, 1994). Because these myths are providing context for these programs and are guiding the beliefs held by teachers and promoted in curriculum materials, it is crucial that critical educators continue to deconstruct and problematize these myths. Critical research is always tied to "an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or sphere within the society" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, p. 140). With this research I hope to further help expose these racist, sexist, and classist myths and begin a conversation about how to replace this negative discourse with one that focuses on the injustice of the economic system rather than the perceived shortcomings of those women caught up in the welfare system.

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